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LIFE TODAY IN THE PALA MISSION STATION.

FRANK J. POLLEY.

[Read April 3, 1893.]

The early history of Pala is already written. As this paper is not historical, it is sufficient merely to note that the church was founded as a branch establishment of the San Luis Rey Mission. Father Antonio Peyri was the moving spirit through whose efforts the settlement was effected. He was then one of the resident priests at San Luis Rey, and had this last-named mission in a very prosperous condition. He took much interest in his new work, and within a year or two it had prospered until from one to two thousand had gathered there. His spirit is said to hover over the ruins.

Father Peyri seems to have been a zealous priest, for the orchard and buildings bear testimony to days of former good management. In times of trouble this settlement, owing to its secluded position, escaped for a time the more immediate reverses that others experienced. It is said that much property was removed there at one time from San Luis Rey.

A more sheltered nook than this valley at Pala the tourist cannot find. By following up the San Luis River the church is reached, but the easiest way is to start from Temecula, and take a pass over the mountains that eventually leads into the valley. It is not an easy ride, but the journey need not occupy the whole of a day, and the scenery is very fine. No line of railroad passes near Pala, and hence, though really one of the most interesting missions to visit, it is the least seen and known of all.

Mr. Viele, the present owner of most of the old mission property, is the only white man residing near by. His store and dwelling is a long, low adobe opposite the church. Near by is his blacksmith shop, and in the open space between the church ruins and the river are the remains of the brush booths used by the people at the yearly festival, and these, with the remnants of the mission buildings, corral walls and the quaint Indian church with its beautiful bell tower, constitute the Pala of today.

The river is a small stream a few yards distant from the settlement. The valley adjacent to the church is too narrow to admit of much cultivation, but further along the river the fields broaden out

and are fairly well settled by a mixed population, who, if not prosperous, seem contented in the old Californian way.

There is a small wooden school house near the river, and back in the timber are a number of cabins inhabited by the Indians, but these buildings are so sheltered as to be seldom seen, and therefore do not count in the general view.

The natural charm of this lovely retreat lies in the grandeur of the surrounding mountains that apparently rise in huge overlapping rings, each encircling the diminutive valley.

My lodging house was with Mr. Viele. The walls of my room were decorated with stuffed skins of animals and snakes that hung directly over the stretcher of rawhide I used for a bed. Travelers were evidently a novelty, and groups of Indians and half-breeds surveyed me with much interest.

The visitors are the government doctor or Indian agent. Then come the basket hunters, and occasionally one who loves an old mission for its historic past. The agent and the doctor visit the place perfunctorily, the agent listens to any who may have the courage to make complaint, and, after dinner the government doctor, before taking his departure, inquires fiercely if anyone is sick, but, as most of the sick have been hidden in the mountains before his coming, but few answer, and, the law being fulfilled, he departs for more congenial quarters and better table board.

A diminutive old Chinaman has been here fifteen years, and seldom speaks except to curse and swear with remarkable fluency. The world will never fully know his story, but long ago he came from the direction of San Diego and stopped at the ranch. He slept over night in the hay, and has never since left the place. It was years before stray bits of his history became known. He was fleeing from highbinders, when, after days of almost unconscious wanderings, he found this place. He still dreads this secret organization, and never falters in his belief that some day they will find and kill him. He frequently makes the tour around the mission walls, peers into nooks and outhouses, pokes the hay in the barn with his stick and mutters fiercely to himself. Together we watched the pigeons hover over the adobe hovels, and at dusk, with only the gleam of his lantern, we wandered from ruin to ruin, or paused to rest on the divided walls of the enclosures. Upon one evening, when returning, a number of white apparitions rushed toward me with rapid motion from the old ruins. The onslaught was so sudden in the awful silence of the night that it threw me into a panic, and I fled to the house more dead than alive. It was a flock of white geese that the Chinaman had disturbed, and it was long before I heard the last of the adventure.

Mr. Viele stumbled upon Pala many years ago, and has reigned supreme ever since. He erected his little forge and commenced the business of blacksmithing, ranching and keeping a general store for the adjacent country. His wife is well informed upon matters of early California ranch life, and they and their children speak the Indian dialect fluently.

Trading with the Indians is a slow but simple process. An uncouth Indian figure in strange garb will silently enter the store, and, with hat in hand, stand motionless in the center of the room until Mrs. Viele chooses to recognize him. Then follow rapid sentences in the guttural tone, she executes her judgment in supplying his wants and hands out the parcel, but the figure stands silently and motionless as before. Time passes, and soon the Indian is leaning against the center post. A little later the position is swiftly changed, and next when one thinks of him the figure has vanished and rejoined the group who are smoking their cigarettes by the fence. Money is seldom paid until after their crops are sold. With the squaw the transaction is different in this respect. Like her European sister, every piece of cloth has to be unrolled before purchasing; otherwise it is much the same as with the men. Both men and women are very coarse, education and morality are on a very low plane, the marital vow seems to be but little regarded, and it is no uncommon thing to see, within the shadow of the mission walls, five or six couples living in common in one room. The race is fast dying out from disease, for which the white people are largely responsible. Unable to cope with these new ills, suspicious of the government doctor, and treated like common property by the lower white element in the mountain regions, the Indians are jealous and distrustful of all; even the sick, instead of being brought to the settlement for treatment, are secreted in the hills. One old squaw of uncertain age came each day in a clumsy shuffle to the gate, and there sank her fat body into an almost indistinguishable heap of rags and flesh. The gift of a cigarette would temporarily arouse her to animation; otherwise she would sit there for hours, apparently oblivious to all that was passing, and certainly ignored by all in the house except myself. The education of the Indian here is a serious problem. They do not attend the county school, nor are they encouraged to come, as their morals are demoralizing to the rest of the class. The chief, or captain, is elected by the tribe, and, though only about 30 years of age, the present one has had his position a long time. His duties are light, and he is careful in executing his authority. He is a reasonably bright fellow, speaks English fairly well and often succeeds in securing justice for his tribe in the way of government supplies. The balance of his time he cul-

tivates a little patch of garden, and seems to enjoy life after the Indian fashion.

Procuring the church keys was not so simple a matter, as the building is now closed and services are held at very rare intervals. This is the result of a litigation. The law has invaded this sheltered haven. Years ago, when times were different and the mission was making some pretense to be a living church, in the course of their duties a party of government surveyors came here. As a result of their surveys one of them told Mr. Viele in confidence that the entire mission buildings, olive orchards and lands were all on government property. Mr. Viele at once took steps to claim all, and did so. The secret leaked out, and others came in and attempted to settle on parts of the property under various claims of title, and soon the Catholic church and the claimants were engaged in a long lawsuit, which proved the death struggle of the church's interests. Mr. Viele emerged victorious, sole owner of the church, the orchard, the bells, and even the graveyard. Afterward, by deed of gift, he gave the church authorities the tumble-down ruin of the church, the dark adobe robing room, the bells and the graveyard, but, because Mr. Viele still withheld the valuable lands from the church, no services are held there, and the quarrel has gone on year by year. Mr. Viele clings to what he terms his legal rights, and the church is locked up and the Indian left largely to his own devices. Once in possession of the keys, we found them immense pieces of iron, and it took some time to unlock the door. The services of one of the Indian pupils materially assisted us in our investigations. The church is a veritable curiosity, narrow, long, low and dark, with adobe walls and heavy beams roughly set in the sides to furnish support for the roof. Canes and tules constitute this part of the structure. The earthen walls are covered with rude paintings of Indian design and of strange coloring that have preserved their tone very well indeed. Great square bricks badly worn pave the floor, and, set in deep niches along the walls at intervals, are various utensils of battered copper and brass that would arouse the cupidity of a collector of bric-a-brac. The door is strongly barred and has iron plates set with large rivets. The strange light that comes through the narrow windows and broken roof sheds an unnatural glow on the paintings upon the walls and puts into strange relief the ruined altar far distant in the church. Three wooden images yet remain upon the altar, but they are sadly broken and their vestments are gone. One is a statue of St. Louis, and is held in great veneration by the Indians. They say it was secretly brought from the San Luis Rey Mission and placed here for safe keeping. When the annual reunion of the Indians takes place this image is

decorated in cheap trappings and occupies the post of honor in the procession. The robing room is a small, dark apartment behind the altar, where not a ray of light could enter. We dragged a trunkful of altar trappings and saints' vestments out into the light. The dust lay thickly upon the garments in these old chests, and it is to be hoped that no one with a shade less of morality than we had will ever explore their treasures, or the church may be robbed and the images suffer much loss of their decorative attire. Undoubtedly everything of value has long since been removed, but what remains is very quaint and odd, being largely of Indian workmanship. Everything about this simple structure spoke of slow and patient work by the native workmen, and it needed but little imaginative power to conjure up the scene when men were hauling trees from the mountains, making the shallow, square bricks, preparing the adobe, and later painting these walls as earnestly perhaps as did some of the greater artists in the gorgeous chapels of cultivated Rome. The hinges creaked loudly and the great key grated harshly in the rusty lock as we spent some time in securing the fastenings at our departure. The beauty of the valley and the bright sunlight were in great contrast to the cool shadows of the dimly-lighted church. Once outside, we again made the circuit of the outlying walls, where birds sing and grasses grow from the ruined walls of the adobes. Through gaps in them we passed from one enclosure to another, this one roofless, that one nearly so, and a third so patched up as to hold a few Indians who make it their home, and in tiny gardens cultivate a few flowers or vegetables and prepare their food in basins sunken in the firm earth. A few baskets are yet left in this community, but of poor quality, the more valuable ones having been long since gathered by collectors, or sold and gambled by the Indians themselves. Many curious relics still exist, however, for those who are willing to pay several times the value of each article. Contrary to the general belief the dull, brutish squaw knows the value of money as a purchaser of tobacco and cheap prints, and will cling to her baskets until the last penny is offered.

When my friend the Chinaman made his search for highbinders among the buildings, I generally left him as we passed the old bell tower, and sat down to enjoy the glorious view in front of me. Pictures of Californian missions are common enough, but these of Pala are rare. Not one in a thousand knows anything of this place, and hence the small demand for artists to make the pilgrimage. But after several trips¹ to all the missions, I believe this to have the most beautiful location. The charm of charms to me, apart from the natural scenery, were these bells, before the present daub of plaster

was recently put on the tower, and not a day passed without some time spent with them. The belfry stands some distance from the old mission building, and rises from the flat plain so as to be a beautiful landmark from every point in the valley. The architecture is graceful and harmonious to the surroundings, as only the old mission fathers knew how to design, and which those competent to judge claim to be almost unique in its beauty. Not a bell at this old mission but has its history and legend. They have rung for war and peace, and have seen the glory and decadence of the mission life ; but now rusted, and some of them broken, they hang silently in their ruined towers to peal forth only on special occasions when the old life is revived during the yearly festival, for then games and dances occupy the hours of day and night. The walls of this belfry are weakening ; each rain and earthquake lessens their stability, and some day the heavy bells will sink down with the crumbling walls and find their resting place among the graves that now surround the spot. A small picket fence keeps stray stock from desecrating the graves of the sleeping dead ; but nature is not to be thus balked, and weeds and flowers have crept in and formed a growth over graves and stones.

These are the famed spots for midday dreams and moonlight meditations. The scream of the peacock, the howl of the coyote and the clattering hoofs of some Indian pony on the road are all the sounds that break the solemn stillness. After such an evening I have seen the gleam of John's lantern and rejoined him for a ghostly walk in the ruins before retiring to sleep the sleep of the just, while I dreamed of the little brush booths in front of the church again being occupied by the Indians and vaqueros, and heard the sound of the guitar and the tread of dancing feet, and witnessed the games of skill and daring, the fancy riding, the lariat throwing and the many old time sports until my slumbers ended with the dawn.

On festive occasions I have seen riding in Ventura county, Spanish dances at Capistrano, sheep shearing frolics in San Diego, and Spanish games near the Puente hills ; and, while all was quiet during my stay at Pala, yet I count it as one of my most pleasant recollections of rambling travel, and the kind invitations of Mrs. Viele to soon return found a ready acceptance as I stood upon the river bank and waved farewell.